

The Contemporary African Arts Festival

By Maude Wahlman

Many people find African art in its various forms startling and think of it as mystical, old, and anonymous. But visitors to the Museum's "Contemporary African Arts Festival," opening April 20 for six months, will see African art that is startling, mystical, innovative — and signed. The festival will include a major exhibit at the Museum, a series of educational programs, and a shop offering contemporary African art.

The art exhibit

The exhibit element of the festival presents an anthropological study of change in Africa as interpreted by thirteen artists or groups of artists, each working in a different medium. The study is selective: it does not attempt to include every contemporary African artist. Instead,

*Left: Wall hanging, starch resist design on cotton, by Senabu Oloyede, Nigeria.
All photos by Herta Newton.*

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it examines the work of a few individuals, chosen because each plays a different role in a different culture.

However, as many arts as possible are included: graphics, painting, pottery, sculpture, carved calabash, weaving, resist dyeing, leatherwork, architecture, music, dance, literature, and counter-repoussé. The emphasis is primarily on the role of the artist in contemporary African life.

One aim of the festival is to demonstrate how the arts of a people change as other aspects of their culture change. Africa is undergoing rapid social and technological change. Until relatively recent times, many areas of the continent were virtually inaccessible to Africans and foreigners alike—the term “dark continent” was aptly applied. Today almost any village can be reached by road. Television, radio, the airplane, and modern automobiles link tribal societies to each other and to the rest of the world. The influences of Islam from the East and of Christianity, colonialism, and tourism from the West are now a part of daily reality.

When cultures are in transition and change is rapid, it is important to document each phase in its own time, before the opportunity is lost. One means of studying change is through artists, their arts, and their role in society. Since art is an expression of society, contemporary African art reflects both tradition and the changes taking place in Africa.

And it is the artist who most keenly feels the tensions between the old and the new, between tradition and innovation. An important aspect of his role is the pulling together of those experiences that seem most jarring emotionally, bringing pieces of the past and present together in a manner that makes sense to the rest of his culture and perhaps to those

beyond his culture. And his influence is widely felt because he and his works remain a central facet of daily life in Africa. Daily life continues to include the need of the artists' hand-made products: pottery, pattern-dyed cloth, woven textiles, carved calabashes, leatherwork, and sculpture. Even pottery, music, and dance are a part of everyday life. The artist, therefore, is very much in the mainstream of life, and he influences its course.

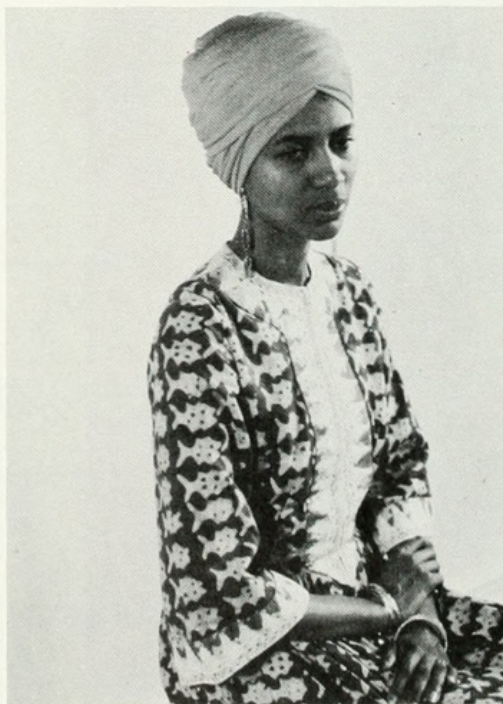
Another goal of the exhibition is the identification of artists by name whenever possible. Artists are referred to by the names by which they are known in their cultures: for example, Yoruba artists are often known by their first names. Traditional African art has so often been presented as anonymous — a false impression perpetuated by scholars and dealers alike. Artists were known in the past, in their own communities, for most art was commissioned from them by priests,

kings, and wealthy merchants. Today's artists are as well known as those of the past, despite the fact that the old patrons of the arts can no longer afford to support artists to the extent they once did. Art is now also commissioned by local and national governments, by the growing middle class, and by foreigners. Other art is produced for sale in galleries and at airport shops. However, this festival emphasizes those artists who create for both Africans and foreigners.

The processes of change are not the same throughout Africa, nor is every artist equally successful in meeting the challenge of new media, new patrons, and new ideas. Some artists, such as the Tuareg leatherworkers of Niger, continue traditional forms with little innovation. Other artists express themselves in borrowed mediums. Bruce Onobrakpeya of Nigeria has adapted Western printmaking techniques to convey African ideas. He communicates through book illustrations and through color prints that comment on Nigerian society. Skunder Boghossian communicates his Ethiopian heritage through his paintings and as a teacher at Howard University, Washington, D.C.

Asiru Olatunde of Nigeria uses a new material — aluminum — to continue an older art form, that of story-telling on panels. The potter, Ladi Kwali of Nigeria, continues to produce high quality traditional pottery shapes and designs, but she uses a nontraditional stoneware clay that enables her pots to be glazed and used for tableware. They can also be exported. Ladi Kwali is both preserving a valuable heritage and publicizing it. In Sierra Leone, Kadiato Kamara provides style-conscious Africans with new textile designs worn to express national pride and a highly individual sense of fashion.

In Kenya, Peter Nzuki is reviving a fine old Kamba art form — the



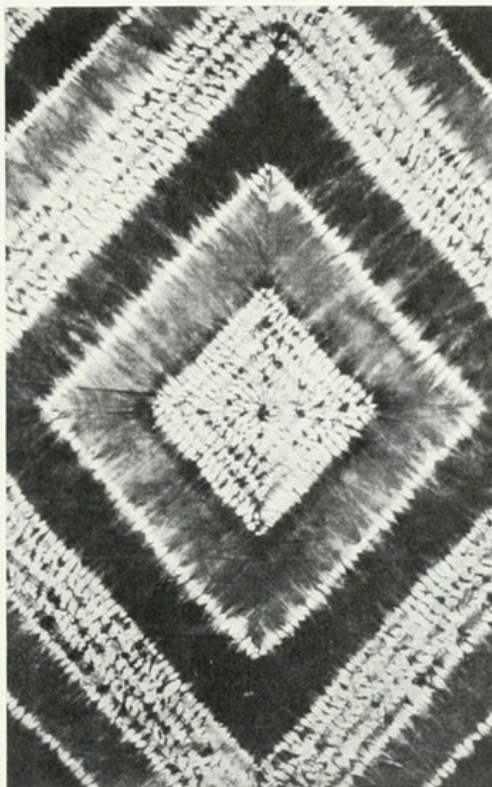
J. L. Williams, leader of African dance workshops to be held at Field Museum, wearing dress of African wax resist cloth

carving of calabashes, or gourds. He carves traditional and new designs on calabashes that are sold in Nairobi. In Rhodesia, Thomas Mukarobgwa carves stone into innovative shapes, some inspired by local mythology. In Egypt, children at the Harrania weaving workshop weave designs and scenes of daily life as a part of their schooling. This workshop may provide a viable educational model for other cultures. The Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy departs radically from other contemporary African architects in his plea for architecture for the poor.

An artist's right to receive inspiration from any sources has been successfully defended by Nigerian composer Akin Euba. (See *Field Museum of Natural History Bulletin*, March 1974.) He combines African musical elements with his experiences as an artist who has lived and studied all over the world. The Dogon dancers of Mali have found a moderate position between the two extremes presented to many African dance groups — the traditional versus the theatrical.

These artists fill different roles in their respective cultures. Most are social commentators, such as the Harrania weavers, Asiru Olatunde, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and Skunder Boghossian. None is subsidized solely by governments, tourists, kings, or priests. Few artists have a religious role today, although all have an economic role. In many cases patronage comes from foreigners in Africa. However, in the long run, the quality of contemporary African arts will reflect the standards Africans set for them. To produce art valued by Africans is the most difficult challenge faced by the artists, and the most significant.

The exhibit was planned by a committee composed of scriptwriter Helen Chandra, designer Robert Martin, and graphic designer Clifford



Tie-dyed cotton cloth, designed by Mrs. Kadiato Kamara, Freetown, Sierra Leone

Abrams of the Department of Exhibition; David Pressler, representing the Department of Education; and the author.

Educational programs

The many educational programs to be presented in conjunction with the exhibit are under the direction of Dr. Alice Carnes, chairman of the Museum's Department of Education. They include performances, demonstrations, three film series, dance workshops, arts workshops, and exhibit/kits for Chicago area schools and community organizations. (A partial schedule of activities may be found following this article.)

Some arts, such as dance, music, drama, and poetry, can be fully appreciated only through live

performances. Therefore, performances by Africans in the United States and by Afro-American groups that have studied African arts have been scheduled. There are also artistic techniques that can be best appreciated by seeing the process as well as the product; thus, a series of demonstrations by Africans in the United States has been arranged. Carolyn Blackmon, the Museum's coordinator of special educational services, has organized these activities.

The three film series of the festival will be comprised of a group of short films shown repeatedly during weekdays; a Friday evening series of films by African film maker Ousmane Sembène; and a Sunday afternoon showing of major feature-length films. The films depict many aspects of African cultural life in addition to art, and they document arts in their natural contexts. In charge of the film series is Ann Prewitt, Department of Education volunteer.

J. L. Williams, Outreach Program instructor, will offer an African dance workshop for thirty teenagers from high schools and community organizations in the Chicago area. Students who play musical instruments will also be welcomed to participate in the four six-week workshops. Through the use of ethnographic accounts, films, and music, students will examine the form and content of "coming of age" ceremonies in Africa. Utilizing cross-cultural perspectives, participants will then consider the phenomena in the urban environment. How does a person pass from one age to another? What are the cultural cues that tell us when we pass from one stage of growth to another? Using information derived from African sources, and with the thoughts and reflections of the participants, students will develop their own "coming of age" ceremonies, and perform them.



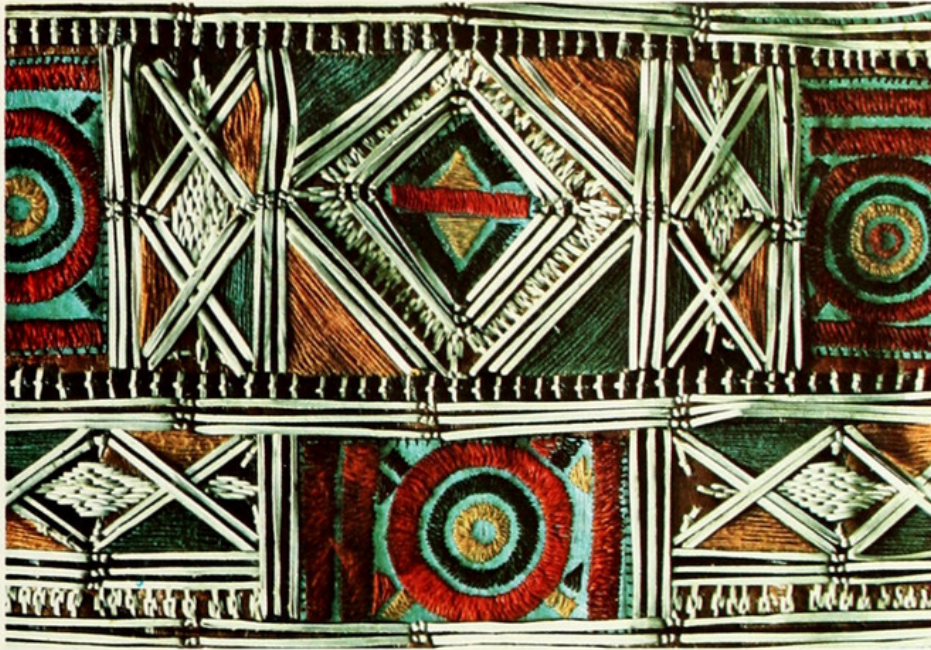
Woven tapestry by Fatima from
the workshop of Ramses Wissa
Wassef, Harrania, Egypt
(Collection of Betty and
Theodore Tiekens)



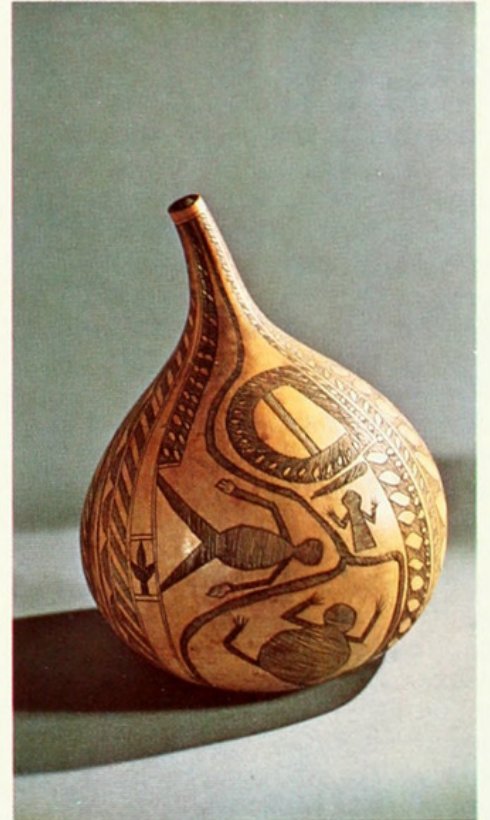
"Big Orange," oil
painting by the
Ethiopian painter
Skunder Boghossian.
(Collection of the
artist)

Counter repoussé copper panel by
Asiru Olatunde, Oshogbo, Nigeria





*Detail of Tuareg leather
saddlebag, Agadez, Niger*



*Calabash, carved by
Peter Nzuki, Kenya*

*"Genre Scene," from the Ramses Wissa
Wassef Weaving Workshop, Harrania, Egypt*



Two workshops weekly, each two sessions, on African tie-dye and wax resist dyeing, also will be offered. Working under the principle that modern design is a link to the past, the students will tour the African art exhibit then proceed to the workshop to discuss forms, design, and traditional African techniques of tie-dye or wax resist. Participants will design and dye fabrics for wall hangings, scarves, or costumes. These workshops invite the participation of senior citizens, or of community youth groups for ages nine through the teens.

Thirty exhibit/kits will be made available on a loan basis to Chicago area schools and community organizations through the Harris Extension Division of the Museum's Department of Education. They are being developed by David Pressler, coordinator of the Harris Extension Division, and Cynthia Mark, researcher/assistant. These educational kits will present some of the arts included in the main exhibit: architecture, leatherwork, sculpture, calabashes, and textiles. Each exhibit/kit will contain artifacts that may be handled by educators and students, a program and activity guide, color slides, and exhibit panels. Each exhibit/kit is designed to be a self-contained experience. However, it can also serve as an introduction to the main exhibit for groups planning to visit the Museum.

African arts shop

In Hall 27, between the exhibit and the small theater (for films, workshops, and demonstrations), there will be a shop devoted exclusively to contemporary African arts available for purchase by all visitors to the Museum. Many of the items will be the work of artists featured in the exhibit; however, a greater variety of arts will be available in the shop than will be featured in the

exhibit. All will be labeled with artists' names, places of origin, or with information about the use of the artifact in African culture.

The festival book

A paperback book published in conjunction with the festival, entitled *Contemporary African Arts*, will be available at the Museum's main bookshop and at the festival shop. Its 120 pages contain 120 black-and-white photographs and 12 color reproductions, in addition to essays on the various art forms featured in the festival. Appendices include lists of African artists currently residing in the United States, selected African and Afro-American dance, drama, and music groups in the United States; a

recommended film series; distributors of films on Africa; films by Africans; and a list of sources of imported African arts that may be purchased. Also available will be color slides of artifacts in the exhibit, for use with the book in teaching classes on contemporary African arts.

Conclusion

If African arts are exciting, it is because African cultures are exciting and dynamic. This, more than anything else, is the message of this festival. The variety, the richness, the high quality, and the innovation one finds in contemporary African arts are indicative of cultures that are changing and evolving in their own unique directions.

AFRICAN ARTS FESTIVAL EVENTS, APRIL & MAY

Educational programs

April 20 & 27 — Royal African Puppet Theatre demonstrations by Baba Alabi S. Ayinla, of Yoruba. For children and adults. At 10:30 & 11:30 a.m., in the James Simpson Theatre.

May 4 — Ayinla Puppet Workshop students' performance. At 10:30 a.m. in the James Simpson Theatre.

May 11 — Batik demonstrations by Samuel Nyunuri, of Kenya. At 10:30 & 11:30 a.m., and 2:00 & 3:00 p.m., in Stanley Field Hall.

May 18 — Dance and drum performances by Ladji Camera, of Guinea. At 10:30 & 11:30 a.m., and 2:00 & 3:00 p.m., in Stanley Field Hall.

Films

(In exhibit area)

Daily, 1:30 p.m.

April 20-26 — "The Hadza" and "Bitter Melons" depict the disappearing way of life of the hunter-gatherers.

April 27-May 3 — "The Tuareg," "Nawi," and "Masai Warrior: Child of Two Worlds" picture the pastoral way of life in traditional Africa.

May 4-10 — "The Dry Season" and "African Village: Guinea" depict traditional village life in Africa.

May 11-17 — "Malawi: Two Young Men" and "Women Up In Arms" show conflicts involved in the transition from traditional into modern African societies.

May 18-24 — "Heritage of the Negro" and "In Search of Myself" portray the historical and cultural background of the arts in Africa.

May 25-31 — "The Creative Person: Leopold Sedar Senghor" and "The Swamp Dwellers" depict the literary and theatrical arts in Africa.

Fridays, 7:30 p.m.

Films of Ousmane Sembene

April 26 & May 4 — "Barom Sarret" and "Toussaint," both set in Dakar, follow their male protagonists through a day in their lives, which is also a day in the life of their country.

May 3 & 31 — "Black Girl."

May 10 — "Mandabi," a comedy telling the story of an illiterate old man who is cheated out of the proceeds of a money order by a series of corrupt officials.

May 17 — "Emitai," the first African epic, depicts southern Senegal during World War II, and portrays the cruel effect of the French conscription of Africans in a tiny rice and fishing village.

Sundays, 4:00 p.m.

Feature films

April 28 — "The Lion Hunters," suspenseful tale of the men of Niger who hunt lions with bows and arrows. Grand Prize winner, Venice Documentary Film Festival.

May 26 — "Benin Kingship Rituals" and "Galede."



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